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Title: *Perfect Sense*

Countries of Origin: UK, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland

Year: 2011

Language: English

Production Companies: BBC Films, Zentropa Entertainments, Scottish Screen, Danish Film Institute, Film i Väst, Irish Film Board, Sigma Films, Subotica Entertainment

Filming Location: Glasgow

Director: David Mackenzie

Producers: Gillian Berrie, Tomas Eskilsson, Malte Grunert

Screenwriter: Kim Fupz Aakeson

Cinematographer: Giles Nuttgens

Art Director: Andy Thomson

Editor: Jake Roberts

Runtime: 92 minutes

Cast (Starring): Ewan McGregor, Eva Green

Synopsis: Chef Michael and epidemiologist Susan are single middle-class professionals living in opulent isolation in present-day Glasgow. Both are psychologically scarred by traumatic events in their respective personal pasts. A long-term eating disorder has left her infertile, while he is wracked by guilt caused by his failure to care for a terminally ill former lover. A chance meeting (the restaurant where Michael works abuts Susan's warehouse apartment) causes the pair to begin a tentative romance. The subsequent development of an increasingly intense emotional bond between the lovers is accelerated by the outbreak and subsequent uncontrollable escalation of a terrifying global pandemic; the latter's inexorable nature and progress is at intervals charted by an unseen omniscient narrator. For reasons unclear to medical science, humankind loses the power of several major senses – smell, taste, hearing, and sight – one after the other. This catastrophe affects Michael's and Susan's private and professional lives in profound ways, as the glowering threat of species extinction overshadows their attempts to persevere with the social transactions of day-to-day life and in a mutually sustaining relationship with each other.

Critique: What couldn't a suitably ambitious filmmaker do if armed with a viral contagion capable of obliterating humankind? *Perfect Sense* reminds viewers that illness frequently functions, to paraphrase Susan Sontag, as both malady and metaphor. The more aggressive and widespread a given medical affliction is, the greater its potential symbolic resonance becomes: confronting the manner in which our world ends seems to offer a chance to better comprehend the manner in which

the world works. For this reason, mid-way through *Perfect Sense*'s narrative the film's unidentified omniscient narrator coolly lists several of the potential causes of the inexplicable disease that lies at the movie's heart. In doing so, she perhaps invites viewers to employ their own personal preferences and beliefs as a way of adjudicating between the possible validity and/or plausibility of such competing explanations. Thus, for a moment *Perfect Sense* appears to possess the capacity to become a parable for (variously): the Gaia-style revenge of an ecologically abused planet; a terrorist attack by the sworn enemies of western powers such as the USA and Britain; divine retribution exacted upon a fallen world; late capitalism's utterly amoral drive to stimulate and sustain constant consumption by any and all means possible.

What's most striking about director David Mackenzie's sixth feature, however, is the fact that the film conspicuously strives to avoid *all* ideologically inflected interpretations of its narrative premise and content. Instead, *Perfect Sense* seeks to work as a universalising fable that explores, in the unseen narrator's words, the common human experience of "the days as we know them – the world as we imagine the world." For this reason, the movie implants a cruelly ingenious irony within the metabolic-cum-metaphoric structure of its viral protagonist's relentless progress: the unstoppable physical degeneration of the human species is accompanied – for Michael, Susan, and many others at least – by a parallel process of psychological purification. The loss of each sense is presaged by an excruciatingly intense moment of emotional catharsis, as individuals are forced to verbalise and exorcise their most deep-seated regrets and fears. Thus cleansed, the final point of collective death is marked, as the narrator frames matters, by the arrival of "the shining moments... a profound appreciation of what it means to be alive: but most of all, a shared urge to reach out to one another." At the film's climax, human extinction and perfection occur simultaneously.

It seems no accident in this regard that Mackenzie's work is structured by two recurring visual/narrative motifs. Viewers are confronted by repeated rapid-fire montages of global reactions, both quotidian and catastrophic, to the unchecked spread of the virus on one hand, and by a preponderance of aquatic metaphors and locations on the other. The function of both devices is to posit *Perfect Sense*'s preferred philosophical axiom, namely, the existence of an intrinsic human identity and experience that transcends ethnic, racial, and national boundaries. Digital footage of the planet's various peoples succumbing to (and striving to survive) incurable illness simultaneously stresses both the fragility of the human frame and the dignity of the human spirit, regardless of colour, creed, physical habitat, or socio-economic status. A surfeit of water-based sights and sequences (for instance, Susan walking on a beach with her sister, Michael visiting a fish market to buy produce for his restaurant) work towards the same end. Water is tasteless, colourless, and odourless in its unadulterated state; it is also the primary building block from which all human bodies are fashioned. Even Michael and Susan's professional occupations, *cordon bleu* chef and epidemiologist respectively, are of significance here. At first sight, such specialised, highly remunerated jobs seems to align the story and themes of *Perfect Sense* with a very specific cultural milieu – an intensely urbanised, economically and technologically advanced and complacent First World society. Fundamentally, however, the painstakingly precise workplace interests and expertise of both central protagonists gesture back towards the film's preferred vision of an all-encompassing

human identity and destiny. In their different ways, after all, Michael and Susan are equally preoccupied with the way of all flesh: he with the things that human bodies consume, she with the things that consume human bodies.

Perfect Sense's resolute universalism might seem to fatally complicate any attempt to locate the film in relation to a contemporary Scottish cinematic context. It is, however, plausible to contextualise the film in just this fashion. On one hand, the movie's preoccupation with painfully heightened romantic and sexual experience links it to other works within director David Mackenzie's prolific oeuvre. Like *Perfect Sense*, *Young Adam* (2003) and *Hallam Foe* (2007) also build their narratives around markedly alienated and damaged central protagonists. Moreover, all three movies employ water as a metaphorical device that charts the emotional depths which their main characters plumb. *Young Adam*'s Joe accidentally kills his lover by pushing her into Glasgow's River Clyde, while *Hallam Foe*'s narrative is built around its titular teenage anti-hero's tortured response to his severely depressed mother's death by drowning. More generally, we might also note the fact that *Perfect Sense* was a co-production between director Mackenzie and producer Gillian Berrie's Glasgow-based independent production company Sigma Films and a range of Nordic partners, including Denmark's Zentropa Entertainments. The 2000s witnessed a notable number of Scottish-Scandinavian co-productions, a long-term collaborative process initially cemented by Mackenzie, Berrie, and Sigma's debut feature, *The Last Great Wilderness* (2002). A characteristic that links many movies within this co-production cycle – works such as director Lone Scherfig's *Wilbur (Wants to Kill Himself)* (2003) or writer/director Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* (2006) spring to mind in this connection – is their determination to prioritise the exploration of (allegedly) universal human experiences over the cultural specificities of their Scottish narrative settings. In this regard, *Perfect Sense*'s apocalyptic imagining of a world in which it is no longer possible to see, hear, taste, or smell cultural heterogeneity represents a logical conclusion to a prominent cycle of avowedly internationalist filmmaking in Scotland during the twenty-first century's opening decade.

Jonathan Murray